



Protecting Montana's wildlife,
land, waters and hunting & fishing
heritage for future generations.

June 30, 2017

Tom Tidwell, Chief
USDA Forest Service
1400 Independence Ave, SW
Washington, DC 20250-1111

RE: Public access to Gallatin National Forest along east side of Crazy Mountains

Dear Chief Tidwell,

The Montana Wildlife Federation is our state's oldest wildlife conservation and sportsmen's organization. For 81 years we have worked to ensure abundant wildlife, healthy habitat and public access to enjoy our public fish and wildlife resources.

Public access to public lands and waters is paramount to Montana's hunters, anglers and recreationists. The issue of gated public roads and trails is growing in Montana. When public routes that lead to public land are restricted, it essentially privatizes our public lands. This results in a loss of public opportunity to enjoy these lands. It also impairs the ability of the Forest Service in managing these public lands and the Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks to properly manage wildlife.

The east side of the Crazy Mountains on the Gallatin National Forest is one such place where public access has been severely restricted by illegal barriers on public roads, trails, and other access points. As you know, the Crazy Mountains are one of the most heavily checkerboarded landscapes in Montana, with up to 80 percent of the public land in the area inaccessible to the public.

Public access is important in this area as Montana FWP is struggling to control a burgeoning population of elk in the Crazy Mountains and adjacent private lands. Private landowners have the right to determine who can hunt on their property. However, the public's interest in hunting public elk on the national forest lands in the Crazy Mountains is just as important. Hunting is extremely limited in the Crazy Mountains because of blocked access to the range. This has resulted in an elk herd that is well over two times over the established objective set by FWP.

Yellowstone District Ranger Alex Sienkiewicz has been working for many years to defend existing public access on the Crazy Mountains in order to protect the Forest Service's

management authority and protect the public's ability to access our public land. He has worked to prudently protect legal access on publicly owned and maintained roads and trails despite efforts by some to illegally block these routes or otherwise impair the public's use. Recently officials in the agency chose to temporarily reassign Sienkiewicz to a different position within the Forest Service. We find this unfortunate, because Sienkiewicz was working to improve public access to the Crazy Mountains along the east side of the range.

It is essential that the Forest Service and other public land managers work to protect and improve public access to public lands. Sienkiewicz was working to do just that. His reassignment sends a chilling message to other district rangers throughout the Forest Service that public access is not a priority of the agency.

In light of these issues, MWF has several questions of the Forest Service related to this instance:

1. According to the Forest Service's own data, large swaths of public land in the Crazy Mountains are inaccessible to the public. These lands have essentially become private hunting preserves with access and management controlled by adjacent landowners. What specific actions does the Forest Service intend to undertake to alleviate this problem and increase public access to these public lands?
2. MWF has a long history of working to improve public access. What can we as a statewide organization do to help your agency improve public access, defend public use of public roads and trails, and open up more opportunity for hunters, anglers and other recreationists on the public lands?
3. Sienkiewicz is a professional public employee who is respected by many and engaged in his community. How long do you envision this temporary reassignment to last?
4. Accounts in the press suggest that the internal investigation of Sienkiewicz is because of his work on public access issues. To the extent that this involves a clear area public interest, how will the public be kept informed about the process?

We are concerned that the reassignment of Sienkiewicz could cause more people to become emboldened to block public access to public lands. This results in privatization of our public lands, and ultimately of the wildlife on them. It is important that the U.S. Forest Service stand up for the public's ability to get to its public lands. Along with that, it is crucial that the agency stand behind its professional staff who are working to support the agency's mission.

We look forward to hearing more information about this investigation and how the Forest Service will continue to protect and expand access in the Crazy Mountains.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "William Geer". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, prominent initial "W".

Bill Geer

President